

12/20/2000

Progressives Dig In For Fight on Capitol Hill

By KEN MAGUIRE
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - Fearing the onset of a conservative agenda from a GOP-controlled White House and Congress, U.S. Rep. Bernard Sanders and the progressive caucus are preparing to launch a campaign "to expose what the Republicans are doing."

Fighting President elect George W. Bush's proposed \$1.3 trillion tax cut will be a key component of the caucus' platform, which will be announced in early January, according to Sanders, I-Vt. The group met last week to strategize.

"We are going to propose a very strong alternative to Mr. Bush's proposal," Sanders said. "You'll see that as the theme. We think that the country can be better served."

Sanders, one of the founders of the caucus, isn't buying the hype from Republicans and Democrats about bipartisanship and unity. He expects partisanship as usual when the new Congress begins in January.

"The Republican Party now has all of the power," he said. "Obviously, that frightens me quite a bit in terms of what that means for working people."

Bush's proposed tax cut would largely benefit the wealthy and few else, said Sanders, echoing the Democratic argument during the presidential election. The caucus favors cuts for the middle class.

The goal, he said, will be to stop the GOP progress. "If we can get the word out effectively... we will win. We will slow down the Republican movement and in fact we will be able to pass some significant legislation," he said. "They are not going to go forward in an extremely over-right wing style. What they're going to do is move slower."

The group also plans to push for such things as a minimum wage increase and prescription drug coverage under Medicare.

Critics of the progressive caucus, whose only senator is Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., said the group's style sometimes prevents it from being successful.

"Like any wing of a political party or particular movement, it's more difficult to negotiate because they're less willing to compromise," a Capitol Hill insider said.

"They bring up a lot of very important issues and sometimes they're successful in bringing those issues to the forefront, but that combative style that many of them are known for doesn't necessarily result in many legislative successes," the insider said.

Ironically, Sanders said, the Republican domination actually helps progressives in some ways.

"In that sense, it makes it easier for us to get our message out," he said.

That message, he added, will include calls to double the Pell grant allowance and increase childcare investments. Off Capitol Hill, the caucus plans to improve its outreach to grassroots organizations and unions, Sanders said.

"If we do our job right, and on occasion we have, we can play a very important role," he said.

U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, will be the caucus chairman. Previously, Sanders was chairman for eight years.